

...and Thomas Thompson wrote some of the most highly acclaimed Western stories and novels of the 1940s and 1950s. His books include *Brand of a Man*, *The Steel Web*, and *Forbidden Valley*, and among his shorter works are two Western Writers of America Spur Award winners for Best Short Story of the Year, "Blood on the Sun" (1954) and this powerful tale of a marshal named Jeff Anderson, "Gun Job" (1953).

Gun Job

Thomas Thompson

He was married in June, and he gave up his job as town marshal the following September, giving himself time to get settled on the little ranch he bought before the snows set in. That first winter was mild, and now, with summer in the air, he walked down the main street of the town and thought of his own calf crop and of his own problems, a fine feeling after fifteen years of thinking of the problems of others. He wasn't Marshal Jeff Anderson any more. He was Jeff Anderson, private citizen, beholden to no man, and that was the way he wanted it.

He gave the town his quick appraisal, a tall, well-built man who was nearing forty and beginning to think about it, and every building and every alley held a memory for him, some amusing, some tragic. The town had a Sunday morning peacefulness on it, a peacefulness Jeff Anderson had worked for. It hadn't always been this way. He inhaled deeply, a contented man, and he caught the scent of freshly sprinkled dust that came

from the stamped square of street in front of the ice cream parlor. There was a promise of heat in the air and already the thick, warm scent of the tar weed was drifting down from the yellow slopes in back of the town. He kept to the middle of the street, enjoying his freedom, not yet free of old habits, and he headed for the marshal's office, where the door was closed, the shade drawn.

This was his Sunday morning pleasure, this brief tour of the town that had claimed him so long. It was the same tour he had made every Sunday morning for fifteen years, but now he could enjoy the luxury of knowing he was making it because he wanted to, not because it was his job. A man who had built a bridge or a building could sit back and look at his finished work, remembering the fun and the heartache that had gone into it, but he didn't need to chip away personally at its rust or take a pot of paint to its scars.

In front of the marshal's office Anderson paused, remembering it all, not missing it, just remembering; then he turned and pushed open the door, the familiarity of the action momentarily strong on him. The floor was worn and his own boot heels had helped wear it; the desk was scarred and some of those spur marks were as much his own as his own initials would have been. He grinned at the new marshal and said, "Caught any criminals lately?"

The man behind the desk glanced up, his face drawn, expressionless, his eyes worried. He tried to joke. "How could I?" he said. "You ain't been in town since last Sunday." He took one foot off the desk and kicked a straight chair toward Jeff. "How's the cow business?"

"Good," Jeff said. "Mighty good." He sat down heavily and stretched his long legs, pushed his battered felt hat back on his thinning, weather-bleached hair, and made himself a cigarette. He saw the papers piled on the desk, and glancing at the clock, he knew it was nearly time to let the two or three prisoners exercise in the jail corridor. A feeling of well-being engulfed him.

These things were another man's responsibility now, not Jeff Anderson's. "How's it with you, Billy?" he asked.

The answer came too quickly, the answer of a man who was nervous or angry, or possibly both. "You ought to know, Jeff. The mayor and the council came to see you, didn't they?"

Annoyance clouded Jeff Anderson's gray eyes. He hadn't liked the idea of the city fathers going behind the new marshal's back. If they didn't like the job Billy was doing, they should have gone to Billy, not to Jeff. But that was typical of the city council. Jeff had known three mayors and three different councils during his long term in office, and they usually ran to a pattern. A few complaints and they got panicky and started going off in seven directions at once. They seemed to think that because Jeff had recommended Billy for this job, the job was still Jeff's responsibility—. "They made the trip for nothing, Billy," Jeff said. "If you're worried about me wanting your job, you can forget it. I told them that plain."

"They'll keep asking you, Jeff."

"They'll keep getting no for an answer," Jeff said.

Billy Lang sat at his desk and stared at the drawn shade of the front window, the thumb of his left hand toying nervously with the badge on his calfskin vest. He was a small man with eternally pink cheeks and pale blue eyes. He wore a full white mustache, and there was a cleft in his chin. He was married and had five children, and most of his life he had clerked in a store. When Jeff Anderson recommended him for this job Billy took it because it paid more and because the town was quiet. But now there was trouble, and Billy was sorry he had ever heard of the job. He said, "You can't blame them for wanting you back, Jeff. You did a good job."

There was no false modesty in Jeff Anderson. He had done a good job here and he knew it. He had handled his job exactly the way he felt it should be handled and he

had backed down to no one. But it hadn't been all roses, either. He grinned. "Regardless of what a man does, there's some who won't like it."

"Like Hank Fetterman?"

Jeff shrugged. Hank Fetterman was a cattleman. Sometimes Hank got the idea that he ought to take this town over and run it the way he once had. Hank hadn't gotten away with it when Jeff was marshal. Thinking about it now, it didn't seem to matter much to Jeff one way or the other, and it was hard to remember that his fight with Hank Fetterman had once been important. It had been a long time ago and things had changed—. "Hank's not a bad sort," Jeff said.

"He's in town," Billy Lang said. "Did you know that?"

Jeff felt that old, familiar tightening of his stomach muscles, the signal of trouble ahead. He inhaled deeply, let the smoke trickle from his nostrils, and the feeling went away. Hank Fetterman was Jeff Anderson's neighbor now, and Jeff was a rancher, not a marshal. "I'm in town too," he said. "So are fifty other people. There's no law against it."

"You know what I mean, Jeff," Billy Lang said. "You talked to Rudy Svitac's boy."

Jeff moved uneasily in his chair. Billy Lang was accusing him of meddling, and Jeff didn't like it. Jeff had never had anything to do with the marshal's job since his retirement, and he had promised himself he never would. It was Billy's job, and Billy was free to run it his own way. But when a twelve-year-old kid who thought you were something special asked you a straight question you gave him a straight answer. It had nothing to do with the fact that you had once been a marshal—

"Sure, Billy," Jeff said. "I talked to Rudy's boy. He came to see me about it just the way he's been coming to see me about things ever since he was big enough to walk. The kid needs somebody to talk to, I guess, so he comes to me. He's not old country like his folks. He was born here; he thinks American. I guess it's hard for the

boy to understand them. I told him to have his dad see you, Billy."

"He took your advice," Billy Lang said. "Three days ago." He turned over a paper. "Rudy Svitac came in and swore out a warrant against Hank Fetterman for trespassing. He said his boy told him it was the thing to do."

Jeff had a strange feeling that he was suddenly two people. One was Jeff Anderson, ex-marshal, the man who had recommended Billy Lang for this job. As such, he should offer Billy some advice right here and now. The other person was Jeff Anderson, private citizen, a man with a small ranch and a fine wife and a right to live his own life. And that was the Jeff Anderson that was important. Jeff Anderson, the rancher, grinned. "Hank pawin' and bellerin' about it, is he?"

"I don't know, Jeff," Billy Lang said. "I haven't talked to Hank about it. I'm not sure I'm going to."

Jeff glanced quickly at the new marshal, surprised, only half believing what he had heard. He had recommended Billy for this job because he figured he and Billy thought along the same lines. Surely Billy knew that if you gave Hank Fetterman an inch, he would take a mile. . . .

He caught himself quickly, realizing suddenly that it was none of his business how Billy Lang thought. There were plenty of businessmen in town who had argued loudly and openly that Jeff Anderson's methods of law enforcement had been bad for their cash registers. They had liked the old days when Hank Fetterman was running things and the town was wide open. Maybe they wanted it that way again. Every man was entitled to his own opinion, and Billy Lang was entitled to handle his job in his own way. This freedom of thought and action that Jeff prized so highly had to work for everyone. He stood up and clapped a hand affectionately on Billy Lang's shoulder, anxious to change the conversation. "That's up to you, Billy," he said. "It's sure none of my

affair." His grin widened. "Come on over to the saloon and I'll buy you a drink."

Billy Lang stared at the drawn shade, and he thought of Hank Fetterman, a man who was big in this country, waiting over at the saloon. Hank Fetterman knew there was a warrant out for his arrest; the whole town knew it by now. You didn't need to tell a thing like that. It just got around. And before long, people would know who the law was in this town, Hank Fetterman or Billy Lang. Billy colored slightly, and there was perspiration on his forehead. "You go ahead and have your drink, Jeff," he said. "I've got some paperwork to do—." He didn't look up.

Jeff went outside and the gathering heat of the day struck the west side of the street and brought a resinous smell from the old boards of the false-fronted buildings. He glanced at the little church, seeing Rudy Svitac's spring wagon there, remembering that the church hadn't always been here; then he crossed over toward the saloon, the first business building this town had erected. He had been in a dozen such towns, and it was always the same. The saloons and the deadfalls came first, the churches and the schools later. Maybe that proved something. He didn't know. He had just stepped onto the board sidewalk when he saw the druggist coming toward him. The druggist was also the mayor, a sanctimonious little man, dried up by his own smallness. "Jeff, I talked to Billy Lang," the mayor said. His voice was thin and reedy. "I wondered if you might reconsider—"

"No," Jeff Anderson said. He didn't break his stride. He walked by the mayor and went into the saloon. Two of Hank Fetterman's riders were standing by the piano, leaning on it, and one of them was fumbling out a one-finger tune, cursing when he missed a note. Hank Fetterman was at the far end of the bar, and Jeff went and joined him. A little cow talk was good of a Sunday morning, and Hank Fetterman knew cows. The two men at the piano started to sing.

Hank Fetterman's glance drifted lazily to Jeff Anderson and then away. His smile was fleeting. "How are you, Jeff?"

"Good enough," Jeff said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"You twisted my arm," Hank Fetterman said.

Hank Fetterman was a well-built man with a weathered face. His brows were heavy and they pinched together toward the top, forming a perfect diamond of clean, hairless skin between his deep-set eyes. His voice was quiet, his manner calm. Jeff thought of the times he had crossed this man, enforcing the no-gun ordinance, keeping Hank's riders in jail overnight to cool them off—. He had no regrets over the way he had handled Hank in the past. It had nothing to do with his feeling toward Hank now or in the future. He saw that Hank was wearing a gun and he smiled inwardly. That was like Hank. Tell him he couldn't do something and that was exactly what he wanted to do. "Didn't figure on seeing you in town," Jeff said. "Thought you and the boys were on roundup."

"I had a little personal business come up," Hank Fetterman said. "You know about it?"

Jeff shrugged. "Depends on what it is."

The pale smile left Hank Fetterman's eyes but not his lips. "Rudy Svitac is telling it around that I ran a bunch of my cows through his corn. He claims I'm trying to run him out of the country."

Jeff had no trouble concealing his feelings. It was a trick he had learned a long time ago. He leaned his elbows on the bar and turned his shot glass slowly in its own wet circle. Behind him Hank Fetterman's two cowboys broke into a boisterous ribald song. The bartender wiped his face with his apron and glanced out the front window across toward the marshal's office. Jeff Anderson downed his drink, tossed the shot glass in the air and caught it with a down sweep of his hand. "You're used to that kind of talk, Hank." He set the shot glass on the bar.

"You're pretty friendly with the Svitacs, aren't you,

Jeff?" Hank Fetterman asked. He was leaning with his back to the bar, his elbows behind him. His position made the holstered gun he wore obvious.

Again, just for a moment, Jeff Anderson was two people. He remembered the man he wanted to be. "I don't reckon anybody's very friendly with the Svitacs," he said. "They're hard to know. I think a lot of their boy. He's a nice kid."

Slowly the smile came back into Hank Fetterman's amber eyes. He turned around and took the bottle and poured a drink for himself and one for Jeff. "That forty acres of bottom land you were asking me about for a calf pasture," he said. "I've been thinking about it. I guess I could lease it to you all right."

"That's fine, Hank," Jeff Anderson said. "I can use it." He doffed his glass to Hank and downed his drink. It didn't taste right, but he downed it anyway. The two cowboys started to scuffle and one of them collided with a table. It overturned with a crash.

"Please, Hank," the bartender said. "They're gonna get me in trouble—." His voice trailed off and his eyes widened. A man had come through the door. He stood there, blinking the bright sun out of his eyes. Jeff Anderson felt his heart start to pump heavily, slowly, high in his chest. "Morning, Mr. Svitac," the bartender mumbled.

Rudy Svitac stood in the doorway, a thick, dull man with black hair and brows that met across the bridge of his nose and a forehead that sloped. Jeff saw the rusty suit the man wore on Sundays, the suit that had faint soil stains on the knees because this man could not leave the soil alone, even on Sundays. He had to kneel down and feel the soil with his fingers, feeling the warmth and the life of it; for the soil was his book and his life and it was the only thing he understood completely and perhaps the only thing that understood him. He looked at Jeff, not at Hank Fetterman. "Is no good," Rudy Svitac said. "My son says I must talk to

Billy Lang. I talk to Billy Lang, but he does nothing. Is no good."

A thick silence settled in the room and the two cowboys who had been scuffling quit it now and stood there looking at the farmer. Hank Fetterman said, "Say what's on your mind, Svitic."

"You broke my fence," Rudy Svitic said. "You drive your cows in my corn and spoil my crop. All winter I wait to plant my crop and now is grow fine and you drive your cows in."

"Maybe you're mistaken, Svitic," Hank Fetterman said.

"My boy says is for judge to decide," Rudy Svitic said. "My boy tell me to go to Billy Lang and he will make a paper and judge will decide. My boy says is fair. Is America." Rudy Svitic stared unblinkingly. He shook his head slowly. "Is not so. I want my money. You broke my fence."

"You're a liar, Svitic," Hank Fetterman said. He moved away from the bar, slowly. He looked steadily at Jeff Anderson, then he glanced across the street toward the marshal's office. The door was still closed, the shade still drawn. Hank Fetterman smiled. He walked forward and gripped Rudy Svitic by the shirt front. For a moment he held the man that way, pulling him close, then he shoved, and Rudy Svitic stumbled backward, out through the door, and his heel caught on a loose board in the sidewalk. He fell hard and for a long time he lay there, his dull, steady eyes staring at Jeff Anderson; then he turned and pushed himself up and he stood there looking at the dust on his old suit. He dropped his head and looked at the dust and he reached with his fingers and touched it. One of Hank Fetterman's cowboys started to laugh.

Across the street Jeff Anderson saw the blind on the window of the marshal's office move aside and then drop back into place, and immediately the door opened and Billy Lang was hurrying across the street. He came directly to Rudy Svitic and put his hand on Svitic's

arm and jerked him around. "What's going on here?" Billy Lang demanded.

"Svitic came in looking for trouble," Hank Fetterman said. "I threw him out." Hank was standing in the doorway, directly alongside Jeff. For a brief moment Hank Fetterman's amber eyes met Jeff's gaze and Jeff saw the challenge. If you don't like it, do something about it, Hank Fetterman was saying. I want to know how you stand in this thing and I want to know now—

There was a dryness in Jeff Anderson's mouth. He had backed Hank Fetterman down before; he could do it again. But for what? One hundred and fifty dollars a month and a chance to get killed? Jeff had had fifteen years of that. A man had a right to live his own life. He looked up toward the church and the doors were just opening and people were coming out to stand on the porch, a small block of humanity suddenly aware of trouble. Jeff saw his wife Elaine, and he knew her hand was at her throat, twisting the fabric of her dress the way she did. He thought of the little ranch and of the things he and Elaine had planned for the future, and then he looked at Billy Lang and he knew Billy wasn't going to back Hank Fetterman. So Jeff could make a stand, and it would be his own stand and he would be right back into it again just the way he had been for fifteen years. There was a thick line of perspiration on Jeff's upper lip. "That's the way it was, Billy," Jeff said.

He saw the quick smile cross Hank Fetterman's face, the dull acceptance and relief in Billy Lang's eyes. "Get out of town, Svitic," Billy Lang said. "I'm tired of your troublemaking. If Hank's cows got in your corn, it was an accident."

"Is no accident," Rudy Svitic said stubbornly. "Is for judge to decide. My son says—"

"It was an accident," Billy Lang said. "Make your fences stronger." He didn't look at Jeff. He glanced at Hank Fetterman and made his final capitulation. "Sorry it happened, Hank."

For a long moment Rudy Svitar stared at Billy Lang, at the star on Billy's vest, remembering that this star somehow had a connection with the stars in the flag. His son Anton had explained it, saying that Jeff Anderson said it was so, so it must be so. But it wasn't so. Hank Fetterman wasn't in jail. They weren't going to do anything about the ruined corn. The skin wrinkled on his face and his lips moved thickly but no sound came out. He could not understand. Thirteen years he had lived in this America, but still he could not understand. His son had tried to tell him the things they taught in the schools and the things Jeff Anderson said were so; but Rudy had his soil to work and his crops to plant, and when a man's back was tired his head did not work so good. Rudy Svitar knew only that if the jimson weed grew in the potato patch, you cut it out. And the wild morning-glory must be pulled out by the roots. No one came to do these things for a man. A man did these chores himself. He turned and walked solidly up the street toward where he had left his spring wagon by the church.

His wife Mary was there, a thick, tired woman who never smiled nor ever complained, and watching them, Jeff saw Anton, their son, a boy of twelve with an old man's face, a boy who had always believed every word Jeff Anderson said. Jeff saw young Anton looking down the street toward him, and he remembered the boy's serious brown eyes and the thick, black hair that always stood out above his ears and lay rebelliously far down his neck. He remembered the hundred times he had talked to young Anton, patiently explaining things so Anton would understand, learning his own beliefs from the process of explaining them in simple words. And Anton would listen and then repeat to his parents in Bohemian, telling them this was so because Jeff Anderson said it was so. A bright boy with an unlimited belief in the future, in a household where there was no future. At times it seemed to Jeff almost as if God had looked

upon Rudy and Mary Svitar and wanted to compensate in some way, so he had given them Anton.

Jeff saw Rudy reaching into the bed of the wagon. He saw Mary protest once; then Mary stood there, resigned, and now the boy had his father's arm and there was a brief struggle. The father shook the boy off, and now Rudy had a rifle and he was coming back down the street, walking slowly, down the middle of the street, the rifle in the crook of his arm.

Billy Lang moved. He met Rudy halfway, and he held out his hand. Jeff saw Rudy hesitate, take two more steps; and now Billy was saying something and Rudy dropped his head and let his chin lie on his chest. The boy came running up, and he took the rifle out of his father's hand and the crowd in front of the saloon expelled its breath. Jeff felt the triumph come into Hank Fetterman. He didn't need to look at the man. He could feel it.

The slow, wicked anger was inside Hank Fetterman, goaded by his ambition, his sense of power, and the cat-like eagerness was in his eyes. "No Bohunk tells lies about me and gets away with it," he murmured. "No Bohunk comes after me with a gun and gets a second chance." His hand dropped and rested on the butt of his holstered six-shooter, and then the thumb of his left hand touched Jeff Anderson's arm. "Have a drink with me, Jeff?"

Jeff saw Elaine standing in front of the church, and he could feel her anxiety reaching through the hot, troubled air. And he saw the boy there in the street, the gun in his hands, his eyes, bewildered, searching Jeff Anderson's face. "I reckon I won't have time, Hank," Jeff said. He walked up the street, and now the feeling of being two people was strong in him, and there was a responsibility to Billy Lang that he couldn't deny. He had talked Billy into taking this job. It was a lonely job, and there was never a lonelier time than when a man was by himself in the middle of the street. He came close to Billy and he said, "Look, Billy, if you can take a

gun away from one man, you can take a gun away from another."

Billy looked at him. Billy's hands were shaking, and there was sweat on his face. "A two-year-old kid could have taken that gun away from Rudy, and you know it," he said. He reached up swiftly and unpinned the badge from his vest. He handed it across. "You want it?"

Jeff looked at that familiar piece of metal, and he could feel the boy's eyes on him; and then he looked up and he saw Elaine there on the church porch, and he thought of his own dreams and of the plans he and Elaine had made for the future. "No, Billy," he said. "I don't want it."

"Then let it lay there," Billy Lang said. He dropped the badge into the dust of the street and hurried off, a man who had met defeat and accepted it, a man who could now go back to the clothing store and sell shirts and suits and overalls because that was the job he could do best. There was no indignity in Billy Lang's defeat. He had taken a role that he wasn't equipped to handle, and he was admitting it.

The boy said, "Mr. Jeff, I don't understand. You told me once--"

"We'll talk about it later, Anton," Jeff said. "Tell your dad to go home." He walked swiftly toward Elaine, swallowing against the sourness in his throat.

They drove out of town, Jeff and Elaine Anderson, toward their own home and their own life; and now the full heat of the day lay on the yellow slopes, and the dry air crackled with the smell of dust and the cured grass, and the leather seat of the buggy was hot to the touch. A mile out of town Jeff stopped in the shade of a sycamore, and put up the top. He moved with dull efficiency, pausing momentarily to glance up as Hank Fetterman and his two riders passed on their way back to the ranch. He got back into the buggy and unwrapped the lines from the whipstock, and Elaine said, "If there's anything you want to say, Jeff--"

How could he say it? He couldn't, for the thing that was most in his mind had nothing to do with the matter at hand, and yet it had everything to do with it and it couldn't be explained. For he was thinking not of Hank Fetterman nor of Rudy Svitac, but of a colored lithograph, a town promotion picture that had once hung on every wall in this town. It showed wide tree-lined streets, a tremendous townhouse with a flag half as large as the building flying from a mast, and lesser pennants, all mammoth, rippling from every building. Tiny men in cutaway coats and top hats leisurely strolled the avenues, and high-wheeled bicycles rolled elegantly past gleaming black victorias on the street of exclusive shops, while three sleek trains chuffed impatiently at the station. The railroad had put on a large land promotion around here when the road was first built. They had offered excursion trips free so that people could see the charms of New Canaan. They had handed out these lithos of the proposed town by the bushel. For a while New Canaan bustled with activity, and men bought town lots staked out in buffalo grass. And then the bubble burst, and New Canaan settled back to what it was before—a place called Alkali at the edge of open cattle range. And young Anton Svitac had come to see Marshal Jeff Anderson for the first time and he had come about that picture—

Jeff remembered how the boy had looked that day, no more than six years old, his eyes too large for his old-man's face, his voice a mirror of the seriousness of thought that was so much a part of him. He had come to Jeff Anderson because Jeff Anderson was authority, and already young Anton had learned that in America authority was for everyone. "My father and mother do not understand," he said. "They do not speak English." He unrolled the lithograph and put his finger on it, and then indicated the town of Alkali with a spread hand. "Is not the same," he said. "Is not so."

There were dreams in that boy's eyes, and they were about to be snuffed out; and Jeff Anderson didn't want

it to happen. "Sure it's so, Anton," he heard himself saying. "It's not what it is today, it's what's going to be tomorrow, see?" He remembered the trouble he had had with the words, and then it was all there and he was telling it to Anton, telling it so this boy could go home and tell it to a work-beat man and a tired woman. "It's like America, see? Some of the things aren't right where you can touch them. Maybe some of the things you see are ugly. But the picture is always there to look at, and you keep thinking about the picture, and you keep working and making things better all the time, see? America isn't something you cut off like a piece of cake and say there it is. You keep on looking ahead to what it's going to be, and you keep working hard for it all the time, and you keep right on knowing it's going to be good because you've got the picture there to look at. You never stop working and say 'Now the job is done,' because it never is. You see that, Anton?"

The boy hadn't smiled. This was a big thing and a boy didn't smile about big things. He rolled the lithograph carefully. "I see," he said. "Is good. I will tell my father. We will keep the picture—"

Those were Jeff Anderson's thoughts, and how could he tell them, even to Elaine; for they had so little to do with the matter at hand and yet they had everything to do with it.

And Elaine, looking at her husband now, respected his silence. She remembered the three long years she was engaged to this man before they were married, years in which she had come to know him so well because she loved him so well. She knew him even better now. He was a man who was born to handle trouble, and a piece of tin on his vest or a wife at his side couldn't change the man he was born to be. She knew that and she didn't want to change him, but a woman couldn't help being what she was either and a woman could be afraid, especially at a time like this when there was so much ahead. She wanted to help him. "Maybe

the Switacs would be better off some place else," she said. "They never have made the place pay."

And that was exactly the same argument he had used on himself; but now, hearing it put into words, he didn't like the sound of it and he wanted to argue back. His voice was rough. "I reckon they look on it as home," he said. "The boy was born there. I reckon it sort of ties you to a place if your first one is born there."

She closed her eyes tightly, knowing that she was no longer one person but three, knowing the past was gone and the future would always be ahead, and it was her job to help secure that future as much as it was Jeff's job. She opened her eyes and looked at her husband, still afraid, for that was her way; but somehow prouder and older now. She folded her hands in her lap and the nervousness was gone. "I suppose we'll feel that way too, Jeff," she said. "It will always be our town after our baby is born here. I talked to the doctor yesterday—"

He felt the hard knot in the pit of his stomach. Then the coldness ran up his spine, and it was surprise and fear and a great swelling pride; and the feeling crawled up his neck, and every hair on his head was an individual hair, and the hard lump was in his throat—. He moved on the seat, suddenly concerned for her comfort. "You feel all right, honey? Is there anything I can do?"

She didn't laugh at him any more than Anton had laughed at him that day in the office. She reached over and put her hand on his hand, and she smiled. As they drove down the lane the great pride was inside him, swelling against him until he felt that the seat of the buggy was no longer large enough to contain him. He helped her out of the buggy, his motions exaggerated in their kindness; and he took her arm and helped her up the front steps.

The coolness of the night still lingered in the little ranch house, for she had left the shades drawn; and now she went to the west windows and lifted the shades slightly, and she could see down the lane and across the small calf pasture where a thin drift of dust from their

buggy wheels still lingered. There was a loneliness to Sunday after church, a stillness on the ranch. She glanced toward the barn, and Jeff was unharnessing the mare and turning her into the corral, his back broad, his movements deliberate; and she saw him stand for a moment and look down the creek toward where Rudy Svitac's place cornered on Hank Fetterman's huge, unfenced range.

He came into the house later, into the cool living room, and he sat down in his big chair with a gusty sigh, and pulled off his boots and stretched his legs. "Good to be home," he said. "Good to have nothing to do." He raised his eyes to meet hers and they both knew he was lying. There was always something to do.

The moment he was sure, she knew it was easier for him, but he still had to be positive that she understood that now it was different. Once he made this move there would be no turning back. She had to see that. An hour ago the town had been a town, nothing more; and if certain merchants felt business would be better with Hank Fetterman running things, that was their business; and if Billy Lang wanted to go along with that thinking or go back to the clothing store, that was his business. Jeff Anderson hadn't needed the town. It was a place to shop and nothing more, and a man could shop as well with Hank Fetterman running things as he could with Jeff Anderson running things. But now, suddenly, that had changed, and there was tomorrow to think about, and it was exactly as he had explained it to Anton. Now, one day soon, Jeff Anderson might be explaining the same things to his own son; and a man had to show his son that he believed what he said, for if he didn't, there was nothing left—. "I was wrong about Billy Lang," Jeff Anderson said. "He's not going to stand up to Hank Fetterman."

She looked into his eyes and saw the deep seriousness and knew his every thought, and in this moment they were closer than they had ever been before; and she remembered thinking so many times of men and women

who had been married for fifty years or more and of how they always looked alike. She said, "I have some curtains I promised Mary Svitac. Will you take them to her when you go?"

She didn't trust herself to say more, and she didn't give him a lingering embrace as a woman might who was watching her man go off to danger; but she pretended to be busy and turned her head so that his lips just brushed her temple, and it was as casual as if he were only going to his regular day's work. "And thank her for the pickles," she said.

He stalked out of the house as if he didn't like having his Sunday disturbed by such woman nonsense, but when he was halfway to the barn his stride lengthened and she saw the stiffness of his back and the set of his shoulders. She sat down then and cried.

Anton, the boy, was pouring sour milk into a trough for the pigs when Jeff rode into the Svitac yard. The world could collapse, but pigs had to be fed, and the boy was busy with his thoughts and did not see Jeff ride up. The door of the little house that was half soddy, half dugout, opened, and Mary Svitac called something in Bohemian. The boy looked up, startled, and Jeff smiled. "Will you ride my horse over and tie him in the shade, Anton?"

The flood of hope that filled the boy's eyes was embarrassing to a man, and Jeff dismounted quickly, keeping his head turned. He took the bundle of curtains from behind the saddle, and handed the reins to the boy; then walked on to the sod house where Mary Svitac stood, the shawl tied under her chin framing her round, expressionless face. He handed her the curtains. "Those pickles you gave us were fine, Mrs. Svitac. Elaine wanted me to bring these curtains over."

Mary Svitac let her rough fingers caress the curtain material. "I will give you all the pickles," she said. "We don't need the curtains. We don't stay here no more."

Rudy's thick voice came from the dark interior of the sod house; and now Jeff could see him there, sitting in a

chair, a man dulled with work and disappointments, a man with a limited knowledge of English who had come to a new country with a dream, and found grasshoppers and drought and blizzards and neighbors who tried to drive him out. He looked up. "We don't stay," he said.

"Can I come in for a minute, Mrs. Svitac?" Jeff asked. "I make coffee," she said.

He stooped to pass through the low door, and he took off his hat and sat down. Now that his eyes were accustomed to the darkness of the room, he saw the big lithograph there on the wall, the only decoration. Rudy Svitac stared unblinkingly at the floor, and a tear ran unashamed down the side of his nose. "We don't stay," he said.

"Sure, Rudy," Jeff Anderson said softly. "You stay."

Mary Svitac started to cry. There were no tears, for the land had taken even that away from her. There were just sobs—dry, choking sounds as she made the coffee—but they were woman sounds, made for her man; and she was willing to give up fifteen years of work if her man would be safe. "They will fight with us," she said. "They put cows in my Rudolph's corn. They tear down our fence. Soon they come to break my house. Is too much. Rudolph does not know fight. Rudolph is for plant the ground and play violin—"

"You stay, Rudy," Jeff Anderson said. "The law will take care of you. I promise you that."

Rudy Svitac shook his ponderous head. "Law is for Hank Fetterman," he said. "Is not for me."

"It's not so, Rudy," Jeff said. "You ask Anton. He knows."

"I ask Anton," Rudy Svitac said. "He says I am right. Law is for Hank Fetterman."

The boy came to the door and stood there, peering inside the room. His face was white, drawn with worry, but the hope was still in his eyes and a confidence was there. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Jeff could hear the sound of horses approaching—Jeff stood up and the feeling that was in him was an old and famil-

iar feeling—a tightening of all his muscles. He went to the corner of the room and took Rudy Svitac's rifle from its place, and he levered in a shell, leaving the rifle at full cock. He stepped through the door then, and he put his hand on the boy's head. "You explain again to your father about the law," he said. "You know, Anton, like we talked before."

"I know," Anton Svitac said.

Jeff stepped swiftly through the door into the sunlight, and he saw Hank Fetterman and the same two riders who had been with him at the saloon coming toward the soddy. Only Hank was armed, and this could be handy later, when Hank talked to the judge. If we had expected trouble, all three of us would have been armed, Judge, Hank Fetterman could say—. They rode stiffly, holding their horses in. Jeff Anderson stood the cocked rifle by the fencepost, placing it carefully. He pushed his hat back on his head and felt the sun on his back as he leaned there, one foot on a fence rail, watching the pigs eat the sour milk.

He knew when the riders were directly beside him, and he turned, his elbows leaning on the top rail of the fence behind him. His hat was pushed back, but his face was in shade, for he had moved to where he was between the sun and the riders. Hank Fetterman said, "We're seeing a lot of each other, neighbor."

"Looks that way," Jeff said.

Hank Fetterman quieted his horse with a steady hand. His eyes never left Jeff Anderson's face. "I asked you once today if you was a friend of the Bohunks," he said. "Maybe I better ask it again."

"Maybe it depends on what you've got on your mind, Hank."

"The Bohunk's been eating my beef," Fetterman said. "I'm sick of it."

"You sure that's it, Hank?" Jeff asked quietly. "Or is it just that there's something that eats on you and makes you want to tear down things other folks have taken years to build up?"

There were small white patches on either side of Hank Fetterman's mouth. "I said the Bohunk was eating my beef," Hank Fetterman said. His lips didn't move. "You doubting my word?"

"No," Jeff said. "I'm calling you a liar."

He saw the smoldering anger in Hank Fetterman, the sore, whisky-nursed anger, and then the cattleman felt the full shock as the flat insult in Jeff's voice reached through to him. He cursed and half twisted in the saddle, blinking directly into the sun. "You forgetting you ain't a lawman any more?" he demanded.

"You decide, Hank," Jeff said.

They looked at each other, two men who had killed before and knew the meaning of it, two men who respected a gun and understood a gun. They said nothing and yet they spoke a silent language, and the man who had been a lawman said, I'm telling you to back down, Fetterman; and the man who wanted to be king said, You'll have to be big enough to make me. No actual words, and yet they knew, and they faced each other with muscles tense and faces drawn, and appeared at ease. Jeff Anderson had dealt himself into the game, and he had checked the bet.

Hank Fetterman saw the rifle by the post. He knew it was cocked and loaded. He wondered if Jeff Anderson was actually as quick and as accurate as men said he was; and because he was Hank Fetterman, he had to know, because if he backed down now, it was over for him and he knew it. He jerked his horse around, trying to avoid that direct glare of the sun, and he made his decision. His hand went for his gun.

Jeff Anderson saw the move coming. It seemed to him that he had plenty of time. He had placed the rifle carefully and now he held it, hip high, gripping it with one hand, tilting it up and pulling the trigger all at the same time. He didn't hear the sound of the rifle's explosion. You never did, he remembered; but he saw the thin film of gunsmoke, and he saw Hank Fetterman's

mouth drop open, saw the man clawing at his chest. He didn't feel the sickness. Not yet—

Time passed as if through a film of haze, and nothing was real. Then they were gone and a canvas was stretched over the still form of Hank Fetterman, and Rudy Svitac was whipping his team toward town to get the coroner. Now the sickness came to Jeff Anderson. He stood by the barn, trembling, and he heard the boy come up behind him. The boy said, "This was in the street in town, Mr. Anderson." The boy held out the tin star. "I told my father how the law was for everybody in America. Now he knows."

Jeff Anderson took the tin star and dropped it into his pocket.

Elaine saw him through the front window. She had been watching a long time, and she had been praying, silently, and now she said, "Thank God," and she went and sat down, and she was like that when he came into the room. She wanted to ask him about it, but her throat kept choking, and then he was kneeling there, his head in her lap, and he was crying deep inside, not making a sound. "It's all right, Jeff," she said. "It's all right."

For that was the thing he had to know—that it was all right with her. He had to know that she loved him for the man he was and not for the man he had tried to become. He couldn't change any more than Billy Lang could change. She had never told him to take off his gun—not in words—but she had wanted him to, and he had understood, and he had tried. No woman could ask for greater love than that a man try to change himself. And no woman need be afraid when she had such love. She thought of young Anton Svitac and of her own son who was to be, and she was calm and sure.

A long time later she picked up Jeff's coat and laid it across her arm. The tin star fell to the floor. For a long time she looked at it, then she bent her knees and reached down and picked it up and put it back into the coat pocket. She went into the bedroom then and hung

the coat carefully. From the bureau drawer she took a clean white pleated-front shirt and laid it out where he could see it. Marshal Jeff Anderson had worn a clean white pleated-front shirt to the office on Monday morning for as long back as she could remember. She didn't expect him to change his habits now.

Beginning with Range Justice, published in 1960 when he was just twenty-one years old, Brian Garfield has written an impressive list of first-rate Western novels that includes such titles as The Lawbringers, Valley of the Shadow, and Sliphammer. Although in recent years he has turned primarily to suspense and mainstream fiction, and to the writing and producing of films, his interest in the Old West continues unabated, as his historical novel Wild Times (1978) and his Western Films: A Complete Guide (1982) attest. His Western short stories number only a few, but "Peace Officer" is evidence of his sure hand with the form.

Peace Officer

Brian Garfield

***I**It was hot. A gauze of tan dust hung low over the street. Matt Paradise rode his horse into Aztec, coming off the coach road at four in the afternoon, and when he passed a drygoods store at the western end of the street a lady under a parasol smiled at him. Matt Paradise tipped his hat, rode on by, and muttered sotto voce, "A friendly face, a sleepy town. Don't I wish."*

He was a big-boned young man. He took off his hat to scrape a flannel sleeve across his forehead, and exposed to view a wild, thick crop of bright red hair. He had a bold face, vividly scarred down the right cheek. His eyes were gold-flecked, hard as jacketed bullets. There was the touch of isolation about him. He carried a badge, pinned to the front of his shirt.

An intense layer of heat lay along the earth. He found the county sheriff's office, midway down a block between the hardware store and the barbershop; he dis-